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## **4. Sex and Politics in America**

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## The Crisis of Trust

*Orange County (California) Register, September 16, 2002*

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In the aftermath of the September 11 massacre, most people of good will and judgment united in their condemnation of the perpetrators and their supporters. They even seemed to be united behind President Bush and the federal government for a bit.

But this unity could not last long. Now there are worries about government abuses, indiscriminate retaliation, and the unjust profiling of innocent people who just happen to look something like some of the perpetrators. These and related worries are leading America, the West, and all those appalled with the deed to begin to find themselves unsure about what to do next and who to trust with the task of finding out.

One of the main reasons is that government, as currently constituted, lacks trustworthiness. No matter how eloquent-sounding George W. Bush and Tony Blair and other officials manage to be as they speak to us about their plans and hopes, it is nearly impossible not to think about how these same folks or their standard-bearers have deceived us about so much in the past.

The famous or infamous exclamation, "No new taxes," from the elder George Bush says it all. Bill Clinton's prevarications lend it punctuation. And no one can forget tricky Dick Nixon, LBJ, and the others who have managed over the years to establish a reasonable ground for serious doubt

about whatever we are told by the leaders of state in Washington and elsewhere.

Even today there is no consensus about whether FDR had early word about Pearl Harbor or whether some kind of selling out happened at Yalta. The instances could be multiplied infinitely. Be it at the most local, and up from there to the county, state, federal, and international levels of government, we find distrust all around us.

In many places police departments are nailed for joining in with criminals. Sometimes it is judges who get convicted for brutality and other gross indiscretions. The CIA is found to be out-and-out incompetent in its gathering of information and in its warnings to those who depend on it to manage our defense against foreign aggression. The FBI gets caught in cover-ups and gross misjudgment, and tax collectors are found to be bullying taxpayers beyond any justification. The Pentagon overcharges us all for some of the most elementary tools and appliances.

So when we live in times in which trusting our leaders is the only way to learn what is good diplomacy and needed military policy, how can this trust be achieved with the record government has built for itself? Is it any wonder that people are concerned even about the authenticity of the evidence against bin Laden? Is it surprising that once the patriotic feelings have subsided, people begin to wonder whether their honest grief may not be misused by their officials? When it is announced that this and that part of the economy needs large-scale subsidies, bailouts, and welfare, is it any wonder that many are distrustful and suspect that a great calamity is being used for the purpose of securing special privileges for some who can make their voices heard in Washington?

All this is because of a government out of control and

embarking on innumerable tasks that are none of its business, and repeatedly making phony excuses for doing so. All the pork the senators and members of Congress manage to extract from the Treasury surely cannot be for legitimate purposes. How much lying must be done on the floors of the House and Senate to make it all seem OK?

When that is the legacy of politics—indeed, when the word “politics” has simply come to be equated with shrewd power grabbing—how can a people unite behind their leaders and trust them when they say, “We know what to do, we know who to bomb, we know where to send your children to fight”? Can anyone be blamed for showing little trust in Bush and Blair and the rest, even though people may wish to trust them implicitly, rely on their goodwill and judgment in carrying out what needs to be done in the wake of the horrible assault on America and not just its own but other countries’ innocent citizens?

I don’t think so. The only remedy, in the end, is to make sure government does its duty and not all those things that must lead to its corruption. And what is that duty? To secure our rights, that is what. Sticking to the job description is a surefire way to gain the confidence of those one works for!

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## Liberty versus Democracy

*Yuma (Arizona) Sun, January 11, 2003*

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Over the last several decades of American political life, the idea of liberty has taken a back seat to that of democracy. Liberty involves human beings governing themselves, being sovereign citizens, while democracy is a method by which decisions are reached within groups. In a just society, it is liberty that's primary. The entire point of law is to secure liberty for everyone, to make sure that the right of all to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is protected from any agent bent on violating that right.

Democracy is but a byproduct of liberty. Because we are all supposed to be free to govern ourselves, whenever some issue of public policy faces us as citizens, we are all entitled to take part. Democratic government rests, in a free society, on the right of every person to take whatever actions are needed to influence public policy. Because freedom or liberty is primary, the scope of public policy and, thus, democracy in a just society is strictly limited. The reason is that government may not intrude on free men and women, even if a majority of their fellows decides to do so. If one is free, that is, a self-governing person, even the majority of one's fellows lack the authority to take over one's governance without one's consent.

This is what the Declaration of Independence means when it states that government derives its just powers from

the consent of the governed. In a just society no one loses his or her authority for self-government without giving it up as a matter of choice. No one gets to operate on you, no matter how wise and competent he or she may be, without your giving your consent, and the same is true, in a just system, about imposing duties and obligations on people. They must agree to them. If they do not, they may not be ordered about. The only apparent exception is when it comes to laws that protect everyone's rights. One may be ordered not to kill, rob, rape, burglarize, or assault another person, even if one fails to consent to such an order. And when the job of protecting individual rights is done by government, government may order one to abstain from all such aggressive actions. But that doesn't actually involve intruding on people, only protecting everyone from intrusions.

It is along these lines that the idea of limited government arises: government may only act to protect rights, to impose the laws that achieve that goal, nothing more. Again, as the Declaration of Independence states, it is to secure our rights that governments are instituted, not for any other purpose. Of course, this idea of limited government hardly figures into considerations of public policy in the United States or elsewhere.

We have never actually confined government to this clearly limited, just purpose. It has always gone beyond that, and today its scope is nearly totalitarian, the very opposite of being limited. But there is no doubt that even though liberty has been nearly forgotten as an ideal of just government in America as well as elsewhere, democracy does remain something of an operational ideal. In this way liberty has been curtailed tremendously, mainly to the minor mat-

ter of everyone having a right to take part in public decision making.

Though the original idea was that we were free in all realms and democracy was concerned mainly with who would administer the system of laws that protected our liberty, now the idea is that democracy addresses everything in our lives, and the only liberty we have left is to take part in the decision making about whatever is seen as a “public” matter. One way this is evident is that many top universities in the United States view public administration as a topic having to do primarily with the way democracy works. Indeed, since the demise of the Soviet Union, even though the main issue should be the salvation of individual liberty, the experts in academe who write and teach the rest of the world about public administration are nearly all focused on democracy, not liberty.

For example, the courses at America’s premier public administration graduate school, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, focus mainly on problems of democracy. At this institution nearly 40 percent of the students attending come from seventy-five foreign countries, many of them from those that used to be under Soviet rule, and what they focus on in nearly all their courses is democracy, not liberty. Assignments in these courses raise problems about implementing democratic governance and leave the issue of how individual liberty should be secured as practically irrelevant. Or to put it more precisely, the liberty or human right that is of interest in most of these courses is the liberty to take part in democratic decision making. (“Human rights” has come to refer in most of these courses and their texts mainly to the right to vote and to take part in the political process!) Yes, of course, that

is a bit of genuine liberty that many people in the world have never enjoyed, so for them it is a significant matter, to be sure. But it is clearly not the liberty that the Declaration of Independence means when it affirms that we all have an unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Declaration speaks of a very wide scope of individual liberty, while the premier public administration school of America teaches, at least by implication, that the only liberty of any importance is the liberty to take part in public policy determination. This, I submit, is a travesty. Once democracy is treated as the premier public value, with individual liberty cast to the side except for the right of taking part in democratic decision making, the scope of government is no longer limited in principle or practice.

Nearly anything can become a public policy issue, as long as some measure of democracy is involved in reaching decisions about it.

And that, in fact, turns out to be a serious threat to democracy itself. Because when democracy trumps liberty, democracy can destroy itself; the law can permit the democratically reached destruction of democracy itself! That is just what happened in the Weimar Republic, where a democratic election put Hitler in power and destroyed democracy. If you ever wonder why it is that public forums, including the Sunday TV magazine programs, the Op Ed pages of most newspapers, and the feature articles of most magazines do not discuss human liberty but fret mostly about democracy, this is the reason: the major educational institutions do not care much about liberty and have substituted a very limited version of it, democracy, as their



primary concern. Once that is accomplished, individual liberty becomes defenseless.

Indeed, a democracy is just as capable of being totalitarian as a dictatorship is, only with democracy it seems less clearly unjust, because one little bit of liberty is still intact—the right to take part in the vote.

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## The Left's Strange Opposition to Preemptive War

*Yuma (Arizona) Sun, February 15, 2003*

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It is a puzzle that so many people from the Left are opposed to a preemptive, preventive war against Iraq. After all, from the point of view of most leftists, it is perfectly justified to send in government thugs to prevent various evils in society.

Consider that all government regulations are preemptive measures. When government threatens to fine or jail someone for producing, say, pajamas that might catch fire, this is preemptive. There are no immediate, imminent dangers at hand. The pajamas may never catch on fire; they simply might—or there is some evidence that they could.

All the bans on smoking now being enacted across the country are similarly preventive measures—when a person smokes, he or she may risk seriously adverse health conditions. But that is not imminent, and yet thousands of politicians, especially those with left-wing leanings, insist that antismoking measures be carried out.

In the law these measures are also referred to as prior restraint—acting against persons or organizations (such as companies) before any harm has been done to anyone, before anyone's rights have been violated. In a bona fide free society, such legal measures are usually forbidden. That is the essence of limited government—it may not impose force unless acting defensively to protect the rights of citizens.

But statist of both the Left and Right do not want gov-

ernment to be so limited. They want it to act aggressively to prevent evils. Just think of the war on drugs or of vice squads arresting and jailing people who engage in peaceful activities, merely because something bad might arise. When defenders of the war on drugs say that even a little bit of indulgence can lead to bad things, and thus drugs should be banned; or when supporters of mandated affirmative action policies claim that unless they force institutions to deal with people in ways considered by the supporters of these policies to be socially proper, people may be disadvantaged—in all such instances, of which there are hundreds of thousands, the state is urged to act preemptively, to prevent possible but by no means imminent evils.

Yet, when the current administration in Washington, D.C., calls for preemptive war on Iraq, the very same folks who find the previous kinds of preventive aggression perfectly OK claim to be outraged. It reminds me of the hundreds of thousands who opposed the war in Vietnam and refused to pay their taxes because they disagreed with that government policy yet saw absolutely nothing wrong with taxing millions of people for other government projects that they eagerly championed but that the millions would not voluntarily fund.

The very idea that such statist on the Left consider it wrong to undertake a preemptive war must, therefore, be questioned. Is that really what they oppose? Or perhaps what they oppose is the United States going to war against Iraq? There wasn't a great deal of opposition to U.S. involvement in the Balkans not so long ago, for example. In that instance the enemy was not even so dangerous to the rest of the world—only to the people in its own region—as Iraq is today.

Something is amiss with the current peace movement.

Perhaps what irks so many on the Left is that the United States may benefit from being the country to get rid of yet another dictator in the world.

My own opposition to war with Iraq is straightforward: Unless it is demonstrated to me that there is a clear and present danger that Iraq is about to be aggressive toward the United States, there is no justification for a preemptive war against the country. It makes no difference whether Iraq is in defiance of the U.N. resolution that followed its defeat after the Gulf War. The issue is what justifies aggression against Iraq by the U.S. military, and that is the direct or the clear and present danger of its aggression against the United States, period.

But those who favor aggression against free people anywhere merely because they might do harm to someone, sometime, have no rational ground for opposing the current American administration's willingness to do the same kind of thing to Iraq, which has demonstrated not only that it has harmed millions of its own people but that it has made sustained preparation for war against neighboring countries and the United States, as well.

Indeed, conservative Republicans, who do not mind prior restraint—some even favor censorship—are more consistent here than are those on the Left who protest against President Bush's preemptive war plans. Most of them have never pretended to be against preventive aggression in principle, only if it doesn't work!

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## A Very Sad Perspective on Sexuality

*Full Context (Michigan), June 1995*

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George F. Kennan was one of this nation's most interesting and controversial diplomats, the architect of the doctrine of Soviet containment, a doctrine he later argued against in favor of *détente*. As will happen with prominent people in their old age, Kennan has written something of an autobiography, perhaps more of a series of accounts and reflections about his life.

What is interesting about Kennan is that he is one of the few American diplomats who exhibit the flavor of the old American aristocracy. His style of life is reminiscent of what passes for an upper-class English stereotype: manners are nearly all. Civility, politeness, good form, and proper demeanor are uppermost in the minds of those who adhere to this kind of life.

The sadness of it comes through most poignantly in how Kennan views human sexuality. His reflection on this score bears lengthy quotation:

There is no getting around it: we have to do here with a compulsion we share with the lowest and least attractive of the mammalian and reptile species. It invites most handsomely, and very often deserves, the ridicule, the furtive curiosity, and the commercial exploitation it receives. To highly sensitive people, it can become a never-ending source of embarrassment and humiliation, of pain to its immediate victims and to others, of misunderstandings, shame, and

remorse all around. Not for nothing do the resulting tragedies dominate so much of realistic as well as of romantic literature. Not for nothing has this urge earned the prominent place it takes in the religious rites of confession and prayers for forgiveness.

There is, in short, no escaping it: the sexual urge, the crude expression of nature's demand for the proliferation of the species, enriching, confusing, and tragedizing the human predicament as it does at every turn, must be regarded as a signal imperfection in man's equipment to lead life in the civilized context. It cannot be expected to be otherwise at any time in the foreseeable future. (George F. Kennan, *Man, The Cracked Vessel* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1993], 19–20.)

If there is anything the modern era may be achieving, it is the gradual abandonment of Kennan's view of human sexuality. This "yes, but" attitude toward sex has perhaps been the very source of our confusion and dismay about romance and sex.

For centuries human beings have, on the whole, accepted that they are caught between two parts of their nature, one that places them here on earth with the rest of the living world, the other which places them beyond the world, in some realm that stands above the world and shows the world's imperfections and shortcomings. Religion has popularized this vision, though it has been the substance of many secular philosophies as well—for example, the philosophy that Plato attributes to Socrates, perhaps the greatest teacher of Western civilization.

But whatever the source, this view has wrought havoc in our lives. Instead of seeing ourselves, including our sexual nature, as a normal, rational, sensible feature of reality, this view inclines us to view ourselves as fundamentally divided.

It leaves us agonizing about how to reconcile what, by its nature, cannot be reconciled.

In consequence, this view promotes cynicism, the abandonment of the effort to come to grips with our lives and solve our predicaments. If we are torn and if the division in our nature is indeed hopelessly irreconcilable, why bother to seek solutions? Why seek for the mean between extremes?

It was Aristotle, another great philosopher from ancient Greece, who began putting a solution on record, though his theories were lost to the West until the twelfth century. When Aristotle's more naturalistic philosophy was recovered, with the help of Saint Thomas Aquinas, it did serve to liberate science from the grip of fear and disdain. But it was not completely victorious. Instead the naturalist view, whereby human beings are the crown of nature, not apart from it, became fused with the earlier Platonic outlook that left us with a divided world and a divided self.

What did this do for human sexuality? It put us into a frame of mind that left some seeking to give it up altogether, against their nature, while leading others to debase themselves and abandon themselves to thoughtless, pointless, mad sexuality. The middle way was thought to be impossible. A sensible, rational, yet still celebratory view of human sexuality was left out of reach.

Human beings have been blinded, to some extent, by the sheer awesomeness of their life: to be thinking and self-aware is indeed nearly out of this world. It is almost forgivable that for centuries human beings didn't quite have a notion of where to place themselves and entertained the thought that they perhaps belonged apart from nature, at least in large measure.

But to have given this view the standing of our official

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philosophy, such that even in 1993 an important figure in our society can unabashedly subscribe to it, is tragic. It perpetuates the misunderstanding, the agony—it gives little hope to our children, who may by this time in history expect a bit better on this score than we have been giving them up to now.



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## Clinton's Duplicity toward Women

*Gaston Gazette (Gastonia, North Carolina), August 6, 1999*

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A favorite theme of those who champion women's liberation is that women do not need men to get through life. If the laws are removed that treat women as subservient to men, women will do just fine with all the challenges of life.

Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary, have been riding on their reputation of being supportive of this feminist, women's liberation theme. They have insisted that it is their social philosophy, not that of the Neanderthal Republicans, that does women full justice.

In fact, however, Mr. Clinton has been repeatedly insulting to women. He just told us that the Republicans are against women because the Republicans aren't eager to give the entire surplus — and there is real question as to whether such a thing exists — to Medicare.

What really is Medicare? It is a forced redistribution scheme that has become a standard feature of the American welfare state. It collects money from people, at the point of a gun, in order to "take care of them" later in life. The assumption underlying it is that people aren't fit and wise and prudent enough to look out for themselves. So government must coerce them.

While Republicans do not disagree with this position strongly enough to have any effect on contemporary public policy, they want some of the supposed surplus given back to those from whom the funds were confiscated in the first

place, rather than given all to Medicare. But why does Mr. Clinton want to give it all to Medicare?

Aside from the very likely reason, shared by many bureaucrats, that you never return money that you have garnered for your projects, regardless of how you garnered it, Bill Clinton says women aren't up to snuff when it comes to preparing for their old age. Presumably, if money is returned to them, they will waste it on something useless, say, go on shopping sprees. "You know how women are, don't you," Mr. Clinton tells us, in effect!

Well, women, in particular, are not wasteful with their money. So the government does not need to keep on in the role of a parent to them throughout their lives, indeed, at any time (since most already have parents when they need them). So when government has robbed them to the point that it is enjoying more than what it expected to get from this looting, the best thing to do is to return the loot.

At least Republicans see that this is the halfway decent thing to do. (They do not see that the completely decent thing to do would be not to take the money in the first place but to seriously reduce government's scope in our lives and charge people only for the basic features of a legal system. That is what government should be about, nothing else.) So they make a gesture toward the principle of private property rights—and support giving taxpayers back some of the money they have taken from them.

In this instance, the Republicans are at least not insulting women egregiously by proclaiming that government is especially needed to look after them. This is interesting because it is usually liberal Democrats who are credited with showing respect for women, for acknowledging their full emancipation. All the prominent feminists love Clinton because of how much more respect he supposedly shows

for women. They even overlook his personal misconduct toward a young woman because, well, he is good for women's causes.

But here again what appears to be one thing is actually quite another. Bill Clinton's supposed respect for women is nothing of the kind. He once again is showing that he thinks them largely inept at dealing with life's problems. One such problem is, of course, reaching an age when medical needs will be greater, and one needs to prepare for this throughout one's life. Rather than counting on government to deal with one's medical needs, a grown-up, emancipated human being acts prudently and buys adequate insurance so as to manage his or her life competently even in old age.

But Bill Clinton does not recognize that this is what women can do. And he is turning to them not in their capacity as grown-up, responsible people but as another special interest group pining for government subsidies. No one can call this being respectful. And Republicans will miss out if they do not jump all over Clinton for this blatant pandering to the scared child in women, rather than showing women the proper respect for adult virtues.

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## Live and Let Live— Everywhere

*Orange County (California) Register, April 9, 2001*

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Back when I first came to the United States, I moved to Cleveland, Ohio, which then was the second largest Hungarian city in the world, second only to Budapest. Since I was intent on becoming an American, I strove with all my ingenuity to escape from Cleveland and the next year moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which was in no danger of being considered a Hungarian enclave. The idea that I should stay with Hungarian refugees after I had finally managed to get to the United States never appealed to me, quite the contrary. I was pleased, finally, to make a serious attempt to become an American, something that meant to me having certain values and attitudes, rather than being born in a particular place. Nor did I think that becoming American was an impossible task.

Even today I see one's identity as more a matter of what one believes and does than of where one comes from, one's color, ethnicity, and so forth. After all, those are not anything one can do much about, but who one is in terms of one's ideals, ideas, and projects is very much under one's own governance.

You can imagine my disappointment in recent decades with the trend in the United States that has elevated ethnic, racial, and sexual identity to great prominence. Who one is does not matter much, but what one is has gotten to be all-important. The recent census has developed a list of cate-

gories that would put to shame most of the old-fashioned racists who used to classify people by degrees of membership in some racial group. And this is finally having adverse consequences. People are beginning to resent being fitted into such categories by some bureaucrats who don't know them from Adam. In other words, there is afoot these days the stirrings of a second individualist revolution.

But not only that. It is now beginning to dawn on some folks that the politically correct ideal of diversity—which never means welcoming, let alone inviting, differing viewpoints on important issues but only having a wide array of colors, ethnic types, and so on, in the population in question (in other words, the diversity is confined to the shallowest kind, namely, how people look to others)—is against traditional community life.

In the Los Angeles area, for example, there are many close-knit communities of blacks, Hispanics, Vietnamese, Koreans, Chinese, Iranians, and so forth. Some of these communities have developed from the desire of newcomers to be near those who have been here a while and who possess an understanding of the newcomers' traditions, language, and culture. Just as my parents came to the United States and moved to Cleveland in the hope that they could get a foothold in a new country, where they would get help with their effort of acclimation and orientation, so millions of others who come to a country they believe is free from prejudice and class warfare nevertheless look for a community with whose members they have some things in common. And while this does not explain all the close-knit communities across the United States, it does explain quite a few of them.

The odd thing is that intellectual fashion now decries the communities that lack ethnic or racial diversity, even

while the very same fashion embraces communitarianism, the view that membership in close-knit communities is most important to human life, in contrast to go-it-alone individuality. The conflict is clear: for some people, basing their community membership on race, ethnicity, national origin, shared culture, and the like makes good sense, at least for a while, though this does not sit so well with those who believe that communities must be racially, culturally, and otherwise integrated. In fact, however, not everyone fits some set picture that many intellectuals envision for us all.

In my case, I wanted a community when I came here, not the sort of community I had left but something quite new. Others had different plans. And in a free society one has a chance to follow one's convictions and not conform to those of some intellectual elite. Experimenting with different kinds of community life is one mark of a truly free society, and this is just what certain influential people consider undesirable. For them, we should all fit some pattern they have thought up as right for us all.

So today proper communities must have a certain configuration and no other, lest they offend the intellectual elites who like to tell us how best to live our lives. But the plans of these elites are repeatedly thwarted by common sense and human creativity. So for some time Asians and Hispanics will probably unite in close-knit communities (that some will fear are ghettos), only to leave these communities eventually and become more integrated into America. I say, let a thousand flowers bloom, and let's not dictate to people the ways they can best flourish in their lives.

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## Never Mind One's Cultural "Identity"\*

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As far as I can recall, following my arrival in America I was intent on becoming American. It just felt like what I wanted to be. Except for some features of the country's politics, I didn't think about this as some higher calling but as a personal preference.

I had learned something about what being an American meant from reading a great deal of translated American pulp fiction, to tell the truth, not from listening to professors of American Studies (of which there hadn't been any back then, so far as I know). What seemed plain is that when one decides to live in a country, it is best to get acclimated, integrated, as much as that's possible. I didn't wish to sound like Zsa Zsa, that was for sure. So, I listened to popular disk jockeys in Cleveland instead of hanging out at Hungarian cafes where folks talked in heavy accents a great deal about the good old days back "home" before World War II.

When, more recently, it began to be fashionable to stress one's ethnic or cultural or racial identity, I was puzzled. To start with, what kind of identity is it that one acquires by accident? So, I was born in Budapest and heard a lot of gypsy music, ate paprika csirke and palacsinta. And, yes, I liked these things and still do. But how significant a part of me is there in that? My idea from early on was that what's important about one's identity is what one contributes to it oneself. Who one is shouldn't be a matter of happenstance

but of purposive action. I liked to read and think about philosophy and religion, so if someone wanted to know who I was, I'd tell them about that. Or, in a less serious vein, about things I liked to do such as traveling and playing tennis. Some collage of these aspects of my life, of the things over which I have had some say, some choice, seems to me to make me who I am— not so much how tall I am or where I was born.

As I got to hear more and more about ethnic and racial pride, I was even more puzzled. How can someone be proud of being, say, Caucasian or black or gay or Asian? What had one to do with such things? Perhaps one might be glad of being tall or of having lived among other members of one's ethnic group if, indeed, this had amounted to a good experience. And one could certainly refuse to be ashamed of being black or white or whatever one could not help being. Even more, one might feel some affinity with others who were being picked on for attributes one shared with them and be willing, even, to unite with them to resist such treatment. But proud? Doesn't pride require some worthy achievement from oneself?

In my neighborhood newspaper, there is someone who writes mainly about Hispanics, and in nearly every column Hispanics are urged to feel special for being Hispanic. Why so? What is special about that? Doesn't feeling special for being Hispanic or Hungarian American or black or tall suggest that others aren't as special and worthy of feeling similarly about themselves? I have never liked the idea of a chosen people because it suggests that the universe or God picks some to be inherently, undeservedly superior to others. When I am told, "Hey there are some other people from Hungary you must meet," I respond, "Why exactly? Do they play tennis, love philosophy, or like the blues?"



The idea of ethnic or cultural pride, it seems to me, suggests something close to an insidious form of prejudice. Without having done anything worthwhile whatsoever one gets to be satisfied for belonging to a group. Just whom is one kidding anyway? (Maybe quite a lot of people, come to think of it, since there is a lot of this stuff going around.)

Don't get me wrong. There is much to be said for many cultural traditions that one can pick up simply by living in certain communities as opposed to others. (Of course there is a lot to be said against some of them as well!) All that's well and good—some of these things are indeed pleasant, delightful, entertaining, and so forth. But why should one feel proud? Surely, unless one has written some great Hungarian or Rumanian or Italian symphony or novel or poem or has otherwise made a valuable contribution to a culture, being proud of that culture is laying claim to something undeserved. (I have a hard time even saying "I am proud of what you have done" to my children—as if it were my, and not their, doing for which credit is due! Instead, I want to stress that I am very pleased with them, glad they have achieved a good thing. My kids may have been influenced by me, but their achievements are not mine, so I shouldn't pretend they are.)

I suspect that there is something rather sad behind all this collective pride. It is probably fear of being considered selfish if one simply prefers certain features of one culture over those of another, so one claims that these are collective accomplishments instead. Saying I will do something or enjoy it simply because I like it suggests that my likes should matter to me, and that's something widely discouraged. Who, after all, are you to do what you simply like? It has to be a superior thing for one to prefer it. Otherwise one should be fair and like everything equally well.

But this is silly. Each person has the right to assert his or her likes, tastes, preferences even if these have no special merit, even if they haven't been proven to outshine some alternative. Why? Because suiting oneself is a good thing. Surely if suiting others is commendable, suiting oneself must be also. And about this at least most of us have a clue, so I believe one should go for it without apology.

None of this means one has to attribute to these preferences something glorious, something especially worthwhile that will then pit one against others who prefer things of their own. Indeed, if simple individual preferences gained moral standing as far as they went, much of the acrimony among different cultures would perhaps subside. If you cannot unite behind some practice or tradition as being superior to that of others, if it really is just what some of us prefer as distinct from what others prefer, why fight about it?

Maybe, also, many people fail to take pride in their modest achievements, so they feel the need to attach themselves to the great achievements of members of their ethnic or cultural or racial group. But that breeds the clashes that have torn the world apart for centuries. I think a healthy dose of individualism can produce more modest ways of achieving self-satisfaction and sap us of the need to impose our ways on others who have different preferences. It's a bit like haircuts or favorite colors—they are pleasing but nothing to make a big deal about.

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## Beat-Them-to-a-Pulp Fiction

*Orange County (California) Register, October 28, 2002*

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As an avid viewer of crime shows and courtroom dramas, I have noticed something insidious worth mentioning. It is far more hazardous to our way of life than all the sex and violence stuff so many folks bellyache about. I am talking about how the television and movie industries seem to find nothing at all objectionable about law enforcement people using threats of force to intimidate potential crime witnesses or informants.

Say that some cops think a restaurateur knows a thing or two about a murder victim or suspect, and they visit the place to ask questions. They are not getting the cooperation they believe they could and should be getting, so they start looking around for violations of health codes or of other government regulations. Or, again, suppose some émigré group member seems to the detectives or “crime scene investigators” to have knowledge of the whereabouts of a fellow member who may have done something illegal. So, no sooner do the wonderful officials see that there is a bit of reluctance about climbing into bed with the cops than they begin to drop hints about some kind of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) investigation.

I don’t know about you, but this sort of behavior, coming from the “good guys” on television programs and in the movies, bothers me a lot. Call me a due-process fanatic, call

me what you want, but depicting such tactics as perfectly OK is wrong.

No, I'm not one who believes that words or images can injure people. Yet, being something of a crafter of words myself, I realize that, of course, words have impact, as do images, stories, themes, and the rest of what makes up entertainment and even art. One need not believe that a movie's ideas force people to go out and follow those ideas in order to hold that such ideas can encourage us to see it as palatable to do certain things, to accept such things as OK.

The notion of a role model comes from this: someone is held up for admiration through the story line or characterization, and when such a person uses some strategy or method of solving a problem, pronto, this suggests that such a strategy or method is just fine, nothing to get bent out of shape about, even admirable. Indeed, all the emphasis on teaching kids the great literature of one's culture rests on the conviction that excellent novelists, for example, are going to have an effect on how people see the world, how they approach the problems they face in their lives.

Of course, there are those who go overboard with this and claim that words and images can injure just the same way as a blow to the face can. That is what spawned a string of court cases and similar efforts launched by radical feminists and hate-crime champions, people who, to use law professor Catherine MacKinnon's catchy book title, don't believe that it's "only words" when people talk ugly. They believe that images of women in magazines such as *Hustler* can't reasonably be taken to amount to harmless expression. They are weapons that need to be stopped with the use of police force!

No, that's too much, quite an overreach. Sticks and stones can hurt one's bones, but from words and images

one can turn away—though that doesn't make words and images ineffectual, even entirely harmless. For example, I recall checking out that old cop show, *Miami Vice*, and finding it impossible to watch. Any time the star cops suspected someone of not so much illegal as bad conduct, they would rough that person up good and hard. No apologies, no self-doubt, no trepidation, nada. Simply charge in there, go at the suspect with violence, get what you want, and then walk away grinning with glee and happy as a lark. Being repeatedly exposed to this kind of thing will often produce complacency about civil liberties, at least when people look on uncritically and haven't a prior moral or political filter against such influences.

We have thousands of TV critics around the country, including many in my own community, writing for magazines and newspapers and appearing on TV, yet I rarely hear much lamentation about this misguided, albeit indirect, endorsement of law-enforcement malpractice. In the effort to keep our society free of official misconduct, it would certainly behoove us not to sit by and just accept it when the entertainment industry's star writers, directors, and actors make it seem perfectly OK for government officials to act like bullies, even if against unsavory, but as far as the story goes, innocent characters.

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## An Open Letter to My Children

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Dearest kids:

You need to prepare for so many things in order to have just a reasonably contented life that I feel sad that I need to talk with you in a special way about the following topic.

As you know, I was born and raised in Hungary. Other members of your family, too, are descendants of recent emigrants from Europe. Your parents were not alive, and few of their parents were living in this country, when slavery and segregation were legal and practiced by many people who were white, as well as approved of by some who did not themselves practice segregation or hold slaves.

Nevertheless, in our day—and I am writing this in late 1992—some people believe that you and I are all responsible, in some measure, for slavery and segregation, neither of which you had anything to do with. Nor did your parents! None of us was guilty of perpetrating or supporting the evils of slavery and segregation. But these people do not care about this fact. They look at you and see that you are what they loosely call white or Caucasian and declare that you are guilty of racism.

Recently, a listener wrote to the National Public Radio (NPR) network about how he himself, who is white, is a racist—and NPR allowed him to read his letter for the entire country to hear. The listener used the phrase, “I am getting

over my racism,” as if racism were a disease from which he is recovering.

Even to honor such a remark by selecting it for broadcast is evidence of gross confusion. To begin with, simply being white can never make anyone a racist. Some sadly vicious or gutless people say such bizarre things, holding all whites collectively responsible for whatever ails nonwhites, be it as a result of racism or of anything else. But these accusations cannot be true. Why?

First, because if being white made one a racist, there would be nothing morally wrong with racism, any more than there is anything morally wrong with having curly hair because one is black or being sensitive to solar exposure because one is white. Whatever one cannot help being is something no one can be—and should ever permit oneself to feel—guilty for. This extends to being born to white or black parents or parents who are well off, or to being endowed with natural good looks or lacking them.

Whatever some people loudly proclaim, millions of whites in the United States of America not only had no hand in slavery or segregation laws but also had no relatives who did. The view that being white makes one guilty and deserves the imposition of various burdens is utterly false, not to mention a form of injustice identical to what racism amounts to. It is morally confused to hold someone guilty for being black or yellow or anything one cannot help being, and it is evil to make that confusion respectable.

I hope that when you think this through, it will be clear to you and you will never accept any opinion that identifies you as a racist only because you are white. If, of course, you have prejudices, irrational opinions either favorable or unfavorable to blacks or members of any other race or ethnic

group, then you are a racist, and you deserve scorn and should feel guilt. But not for any other reason.

Moreover, don't be afraid to disagree with the members of a racial group different from the one you happen to belong to—even about issues involving them. You can fully evaluate their arguments, regardless of your or their skin color or ethnic or national origin. Such origins, race, or color make no one right or wrong—to think otherwise is indeed racist. To fail to air your disagreements with such people would often be a sign of disrespect. They should be as ready to handle your views as you are ready to handle theirs.

Here is another thing: It is hard to think of any person whose ancestors have not been victimized by some people. These, in turn, produced offspring who may well have benefited a bit from that oppression. To complain about that forever is pointless and perhaps even devious. It will, if continued and widespread, return us to prehistoric tribal barbarism—and the clannishness of the Mafia—in which the children of the children of the aggrieved had to mete out punishment to the children of the children of the transgressors. It was one of the noble achievements of the American founding fathers to have laid down principles of political justice in the Declaration of Independence that could guide us toward the ultimate rejection of such group-think human relations. Now, mostly at the hands of those who have revived group-think and collective guilt, America is being nudged away from the founders' conception of a decent society toward a state where all groups war against all other groups.

If one is not a racist—if one does not judge others by biological or genetic traits or characteristics over which they have no control—and judges others by the content of their



character (to recall Martin Luther King's precise phrase), one should not sit still for the nonsensical racist lambasting unleashed these days by half-educated people. One should also realize that what lies behind the current racial strife is an ill-conceived effort to remedy past ills by way of group-think: affirmative action, the proportionate allocation by race of positions that require, instead, attention to competence, hiring and admission quotas, and so on. These ill-conceived policies have resulted in pitting groups united on trivial matters against other similar groups. They have also slowed down considerably the development of a racially and ethnically neutral culture in which what counts is how well one performs, not what racial, ethnic, or national group one happens to be from.

Of course, you will have your own ideas to offer about all this. But I, as your father, believe it is my responsibility to indicate to you clearly what I think about this matter, as I do about some others. That is partly what parents have to do—to educate their children about values. And justice is a value that is now being threatened in ways different from those that threatened and violated it in the past.

—Your loving Papa